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Childrens Generalization of Novel Labels in a System of Contrasting Categories

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Abstract

Children tend to generalize novel labels to new, unlabeled objects (e.g., mutual exclusivity bias) when presented with one alternative category. Do children generalize in the same manner in a system of multiple alternative categories? In three experiments, a feature space was partitioned into three regions (i.e., two outer regions separated by an intermediate region). Preschool-aged children learned labels for two competing categories that occupied the two outer regions of the feature space. Children were then asked if any labels generalized to the unlabeled intermediate region. In Experiments 1 and 2, the results showed that children generalized neither learned nor novel linguistic labels to the unlabeled region. In Experiment 3 objects were labeled with category information. Children generalized a single learned label but did not generalize a novel label. These findings suggest that contrast between multiple alternative categories may decrease childrens tendency to generalize novel labels to new, unlabeled objects.